

TV cable in chains

Unless the British Government thinks again, its promised revolution in cable TV will come to naught.

THE British Government's cable revolution will not now take place. Almost exactly a year ago, the cabinet's advisory panel on information technology declared that Britain must be swiftly rewired for 30-channel cable television or face the consequences: missing out on the information age. Until then the industry minister, Mr Kenneth Baker, had been so blind to the virtues of cable-TV that he had launched his Information Technology Year and its accompanying glossy pamphlet without a mention of cable. But immediately the advisory panel's report was out, he giddily promised that cable-TV would cure every kind of ill, from unemployment to educational apathy among the young.

The doubts began to set in in November. The Hunt report on cable, which was supposed to reconcile British broadcasting traditions with multichannel television, did no such thing. It merely said that cable did not need the kind of regulation that was appropriate to over-the-air broadcasts. Mr Baker, for his part, took note of the arguments that cable television might not be the stepping stone to the future electronic grid if it were laid out in the tree-and-branch system used in North America and on the mainland of Europe. (This feeds signals along a trunk cable from a base to the subscriber's home. Each home gets all the channels carried by the cable and needs a filter to select the one it wants or has agreed to pay for.) He promised that cable systems in Britain would be laid in a star pattern. The trunk cable carries the full array of signals only to a local hub. Then the cables travelling into homes carry only three or four channels, obviating the need for a complex decoder. Because the hub provides a local switching point, like a telephone exchange, this system offers the possibility of being upgraded later into a telephone or video phone system.

In December, Mr Baker told the House of Commons that British cable operators would be required to lay their cables in the star pattern. If they used conventional (coaxial cable) technology, they would have only a 12-year licence. If they invested in the even more adventurous fibre-optic cable, they could have a 20-year licence. Then he, the potential investors and the public sat back to wait for the promised white paper from the Home Office, still the final arbiter of broadcasting policy.

The deadline is slipping. The Home Office is labouring to produce it knows not what. All the irreconcilables still remain to be reconciled. Which authority should regulate cable franchises, fix the franchise areas and decide what social obligations should be laid upon operators? How to protect British broadcasting standards from a flood of channels filled with whatever subscribers are willing to pay for? How to preserve national televised sacred moments like Wimbledon tennis and the Grand National for broadcast television? How to keep children out of the adult-film channels which cable systems can provide for willing subscribers?

In the year since the cabinet panel reported, new fears have surfaced. Mrs Margaret Thatcher is terrified of introducing televised pornography into the British home (and knows that pornography suits cable, financially and technically). Worse terror has been struck in the hearts of the City of London's institutional investors by the likely sums required for cable-TV, British-style. If cable must be buried underground, if potentially unprofitable areas must be wired along with the more desirable, and if they have to invest in the star pattern, which is of no economic use in delivering home entertainment, there is no way they can get their money back in less than ten years.

Ten years? By then the British television audience may have disappeared entirely. One of the shocks of the past year has been the disappearance of 10 per cent of the usual audience. Whether they have gone to sleep, into the garden or to the video film rental shop is the subject of much heart-searching in the higher reaches of the British Broadcasting Corporation and commercial television companies, but also among would be cable-sellers. If the public is fed up with four channels plus breakfast television, will it want to pay the high cost needed to hook onto cable?

In the light of all the new difficulties, the government should stop and think again about a curious ban it has placed upon the cable television service — provided new systems ever get built at all. It is that cable systems may use their cables for the two-way interactive services (they are the goal of this entertainment-led information revolution, after all) but that they may not use them for telephony. Voice telephone traffic, and presumably viewphone when its time comes, are to be the protected preserve of British Telecom and its fledgling competitor, Mercury Communications. So what is the point of requiring cable systems to invest in star systems that are capable of being upgraded into a telecommunications service? The government must make up its mind.

Either cable television should be allowed to expand purely and simply because British consumers are entitled to the extra channels of television which technology can now provide. Or Britain desperately needs a national broadband information grid capable of carrying high-speed data and videophone into the far corners of the land. If the first, cable investors should be allowed to build the pattern of system they choose. If the second, they should be able to use it for voice — and to take British Telecom on as a partner wherever possible. The government is silly to expect private investors to pay more than they need to build a system whose logical technical capacities they are prevented from using. But investors are not silly, they are selfish. That is why the cable revolution is not going to take place. □

Small step forward

Belatedly, the United States plans to ratify two arms control treaties neglected for the past decade

THE United States Government has at last done the sensible thing about the two arms control treaties which have been hanging around unratified for the best part of a decade. Last week the Administration let it be known that it plans to blow off the dust from the Threshold Test-Ban Treaty (1974) and that on Peaceful Nuclear Explosions (1976), take up some questions bearing on verification with the Soviet Union and then put the treaties to the US Senate for approval. This modest and long-overdue development will have three distinct advantages: First, it will give both superpowers the benefits of the two treaties which they have been hitherto denied — the exchange of seismic information near test-sites provided for under the Threshold Test-Ban Treaty and the right of on-site inspection specified under that for regulating peaceful nuclear explosions. Second, it may provide an opportunity for each side to install on the other's territory remote seismic sensing stations of the kind planned during the Comprehensive Test-Ban negotiations, aborted in 1980. Third, it will go some way to show that the US government is not entirely indifferent to the importance of arms control — the impression that has been created in the past few weeks by rigidity about the "zero-option", the firing of Mr Eugene Rostow, the dismal showing of his nominated successor and the complete lack of a response to what Mr Andropov has been saying, most notably in the declaration put out after last month's meeting of the Warsaw Pact.

But what real purpose will be served by ratifying two treaties which appear to have been faithfully observed by the two superpowers since they were first negotiated, and which have made no noticeable difference to the pace of the accumulation and deployment of nuclear weapons? It is true that ratification will seem strictly cosmetic to the members of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (whose next review conference is due in just over two years), who will be looking for a more tangible proof that the superpowers have kept their promise to negotiate "substantial" measures of nuclear disarmament. For that, success in the negotiations now under way at Geneva, or a comprehensive test-ban is necessary. The obvious snag is that a ban on all nuclear tests will be unattainable until there is some progress on limiting the deployment of nuclear missiles, which requires not merely that West Germany should have gone to the polls (on 5 March) but that some agreement should have been reached on the British and French nuclear forces. So ratification of these two forgotten treaties is the best hope for 1983. But something is a lot better than nothing. □